WHAT THE BLIND SEE

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"THE people that walk in darkness have seen a great light," says the Scripture. It is so with the blind, we are told by Dr. Robert Henry Elliot, a retired British Army surgeon, who writes in *The British Medical Journal* (London) on "Memory Sight." There is a wide-spread impression, writes Dr. Elliot, not only among the laity but also in the ranks of the medical profession, that the totally blind live in perpetual, black darkness. This he believes to be an error in observation, for inquiries have elicited from his blind patients the information that, on the contrary, they habitually see "a bright background." He goes on:

They describe this variously, but the terms "like a bright cloud," or "like a luminous haze," seem to convey the prevailing impression, while remarks as to "a play of colors" before the eyes are also met with from intelligent people. A patient of Dr. de Schweinitz, tho totally blind, declared that "all things seemed to be a sea of red fire." I can not but think that this "outlook" powerfully modifies the mental qualities of the blind, and helps materially to give them that cheerfulness which is so strikingly their class characteristic. It would be difficult to believe that any one who was surrounded by thick darkness could by any possibility be mentally cheerful.

There is another feature of "the sight of the blind" which is little known, and of which they seldom care to speak unless directly questioned, probably owing to the fear that it may excite skepticism or ridicule. On this point Dr. Elliot quotes from his book on glaucoma as follows:

Even more striking is the fact that patients are to be found who will protest that there are occasions on which they can sit by a window, look out, and see all the features of a scene with which they were familiar in days gone by; and yet on examination the eyes are absolutely blind. To this condition the term "memory sight" may be applied, for the pictures are but the aftermath of visual impressions stored in the cerebral cortex in a happier past. Such is the power of reflection and of recollection that the patient's mind is enabled to summon these shadows of earlier impressions and to invest them with all the semblance of a reality.

He continues:

I have quite recently seen an elderly patient, long blind in one eye from glaucoma, who had lost all vision in the second eye from the same disease, and who had to have this eye removed on account of constant pain; her one great fear was lest the removal of the eye might rob her of the subjective sensations of light, from which she derived so much comfort. The enucleation of the eye made no difference whatever to these. She could still see the bright field of light, just as before, and she described in glowing terms how she could summon up to her consolation the "actual vision" of many objects around her. Her own words are of interest: "I can make myself see the things and people around me; I can even see every stitch of the knitting which I hold in my hand, just as I did in the days when I had my sight." More recently I have seen a man over seventy years of age who had lost one eye as the result of an accident in his youth; he developed a malignant growth of the second eye, and this too was removed after a consultation in which all concerned were unanimous as to the right course to pursue. He describes his visual sensations thus: "I see a sort of white mist tinged by light from above; this appears to come from behind me." He also sees pieces of furniture—such as a grand piano of dark wood, or a writing-table or other articles of furniture—which are apparently so real and vivid that he tries to avoid walking against them. Be it remembered that he has no eyes whatever.

We are all of us aware that, with our eyes closed, in the dark, during sleep, we can see people and things most vividly in our dreams; but it might be argued that this is not very strange, since we still possess actively sentient ocular globes. It is of interest to learn from these cases, not only that blind eyes may see during waking hours the images of objects perceived in bygone days, but that the complete removal of the globes is no bar to the memory sight, which brings so much comfort to the blind. Clearly we have here to do with memories stored in the brain, presumably in its cortex, as the result of earlier experience. In this connection it is interesting to remember that a man does not see with his eyes, but with his brain; the eyes are but a complex mechanism, optical and neuro-electric, whereby external stimuli are conveyed to the cerebral cortex, *there* to give rise to visual sensations. This explains many things which are otherwise difficult to understand—as, for instance, the way in which a trained observer, with relatively less visual acuity, as tested by types, etc., will pick up and recognize distant objects with an accuracy and a speed which the ordinary man, untrained in the same direction, can not emulate.

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